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Heather Cox Richardson - Letters from an American

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George Takei will serve as the 2025 Honorary Chair of Banned Books Week

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What would an Indigenous Law of the Sea look like?



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An opportunity for anyone, anywhere, to take part. Wear orange, complete your 5K at home, and share your resHeather Cox Richardson from Letters from an American

Today (9.26) Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth announced that twenty men who were awarded the Medal of Honor for their participation in the 1890 Wounded Knee Massacre would keep their medals, despite more than a century of controversy over them.

The defense secretary who preceded Hegseth, General Lloyd Austin, had ordered a review of the awarding of those medals to “ensure no awardees were recognized for conduct inconsistent with the nation’s highest military honor.” Hegseth today called the men “brave soldiers” and said: “We’re making it clear that [the soldiers] deserve those medals.”

It’s fitting that Hegseth, a political appointee whose tenure has been marked by incompetence, would defend the awarding of those particular Medals of Honor, because they were awarded to cover up the incompetence of political appointees that led to the deaths of at least 230 peaceful Lakotas, as well as about twenty-five soldiers who were caught in their own crossfire.

The road to Wounded Knee started in 1884, when voters angry that the Republicans had sold out to big business elected Democrat Grover Cleveland to the presidency. The first Democrat to occupy the White House since before the Civil War, he promised to lower the tariffs that squeezed ordinary Americans in order to protect big business. Horrified at the growing opposition to a government that worked for those industrialists who would soon be called “robber barons,” Republicans began to circulate pamphlets as soon as Cleveland was elected, claiming that lowering the tariff would destroy the economy and warning that voters must return Republicans to power or face economic ruin.

In 1888, Cleveland nonetheless won the popular vote by about 100,000 votes, but after an extraordinarily corrupt campaign, Republican candidate Benjamin Harrison won in the Electoral College. This is “A BUSINESS MAN’S ADMINISTRATION,” the editors of a pro-Harrison newspaper boasted. They predicted that “business men will be thoroughly well content with it.”

Knowing that the popular mood had turned against tariffs and the party that protected them, Harrison Republicans looked for ways to cement their control over the government.

Adding to the Union new states they believed would vote Republican would give them two more seats per state in the Senate, as well as a seat per state in the House of Representatives, and thus three more electors in the Electoral College, for each state has a number of electors equal to the number of senators and representatives combined. Between November 1889 and July 1890 the Republicans added five new states to the Union. They added Washington, Idaho, and Montana. They also divided the huge Dakota Territory in two, creating North Dakota and South Dakota. The new states should give the Republicans ten new seats in the Senate, Harrison’s men noted happily.

But the western half of what was supposed to become South Dakota belonged to the Lakotas. In 1889 the government forced the Lakotas to sign treaties agreeing to sell about half of their land and to move closer to six agencies on smaller reservations in what would soon be a new state. The government promised rations, health, care, education, and help with transitioning to a farming economy in exchange for the land, but that plan ran afoul of politics almost immediately.

The War Department and the Department of the Interior had fought over management of the Indigenous peoples in the U.S. for decades. Reservations were overseen by an “Indian agent,” who was in sole charge

of spending the tens of thousands of dollars Congress appropriated to fund the various treaties the government had negotiated with different tribes. From that money, the agent was supposed to contract for food, clothing, tools, and supplies, as well as for the building of schools, mills, warehouses, and so on. Until 1883 this had been a plum political position, awarded to a political loyalist with the expectation that providing promised rations to Indigenous Americans was the least of his concerns: he was expected to spread that money to political allies to shore up their support.

The Army hated this system. If political appointees mismanaged their work, it was Army officers and their men who had the dangerous job of fighting angry warriors. Politicians noted that the Army all too often killed indiscriminately, and they refused to give up their power. But military men resented that political mistakes could cost soldiers their lives.

In 1883, after a disappointed office seeker assassinated President James A. Garfield, Congress had passed the Civil Service Act that was supposed to do away with awarding government jobs based on political patronage. Cleveland had taken that charge seriously and had installed agents instructed to fulfill their job description. Harrison's men, though, knew they needed western votes to hold control of the newly admitted states, and they spun the system back to one based on patronage.

Their most unfortunate appointment was that of Daniel Royer to the Pine Ridge Reservation. Royer was a staunch Republican, but he was also a failed medical man with a budding drug addiction and little knowledge of Lakotas. After he arrived in October 1890, the Lakotas named him "Young-Man-Afraid-of-Indians."

Since being corralled on the six smaller reservations the previous year, the Lakotas had endured a deadly influenza epidemic that swept the U.S. and much of Europe and killed a number of Lakotas who were already weak from respiratory viruses. Then, hot winds in summer 1890 had burned dry first the Lakotas' vegetable gardens, then their crops, and finally, the native hay crop.

White settlers suffering in the same drought abandoned their new homesteads and went back east. Hungry and desolate, Lakotas had to stay. Then a new census count came in lower than expected, and government officials cut their rations. Destitute and in real danger of starvation, some Lakotas turned to a new religious movement, the Ghost Dance, that promised to bring back the world of game and plenty that had been theirs before the coming of easterners.

The Ghost Dancers never hurt their non-Indigenous neighbors or threatened their property, and few settlers paid them much attention. But Royer interpreted the religious enthusiasm as a sign of an approaching war. Less than a week after arriving at Pine Ridge, Royer warned his superiors in the Interior Department in Washington, D.C., that he might need troops to keep order.

General Nelson Miles of the U.S. Army, who commanded the Division of the Missouri that included Pine Ridge, went to the reservation, where the Lakotas explained their crushing circumstances and suggested that neither Royer nor his predecessor had been much help. Miles brushed off Royer's panic and told the Lakotas they could dance as they wished. When Royer told the Lakotas the next day that they must stop participating in the Ghost Dance, they laughed at him.

Back East, President Harrison and his men were focused on the 1890 midterms. Despite popular demand for a lower tariff, in a raucous session in October, Republicans in Congress actually raised tariff rates, promising voters that the higher rates of the McKinley Tariff would finally make the country boom.

A month later, angry voters took away the Republicans' slim majority in the House and handed the Democrats a majority of more than two to one. Republicans hung onto power only through their lock on the Senate. There, the admission of the new states made up for losses elsewhere, and the Republicans had four more senators than their opponents did.

But of those four, three had voted against the McKinley Tariff. So the survival of the tariff hung on just one vote: that of a senator from South Dakota. In the nineteenth century, senators were chosen by the state legislature, and it looked at first as if the Republicans had won South Dakota's. But then news broke that ballot boxes had been tampered with. Suddenly, the legislature was in play for all parties. Whoever won would control South Dakota's Senate seat and the fate of the McKinley Tariff.

The Ghost Dance had continued to spread across the South Dakota reservations, and Royer was growing increasingly frightened. Some of the other agents were also agitated, sending back to their superiors letters full of exaggerated rumors. But Miles and officers stationed at the forts in South Dakota, all of whom had first-hand experience with the Lakotas, denied that the Lakotas were planning a war. Instead, the officers blamed the Lakotas' anger on the mismanagement of food and supplies by the political appointees at the Interior Department. As soon as the agents addressed the Lakotas' very real suffering, they said, the Ghost Dance movement would fade.

But with control of the South Dakota legislature hanging in the balance, Harrison was leaning toward sending in troops. Settlers liked the military, which brought contracts and government money into the chronically poor West. On November 20, 1890, troops marched into Pine Ridge.

Alarmed, Ghost Dancers rushed to the Badlands, where they could defend themselves.

For the next month, Army officers worked to bring them back to Pine Ridge. Then, on December 15, just as it seemed they had convinced them to return, a police officer murdered the famous leader Sitting Bull at Standing Rock Reservation on the northern edge of the state, and his panicked kinfolk fled south to Pine Ridge to take shelter with the renowned negotiator Red Cloud. Army officers were afraid the band would take news of Sitting Bull's death to the Lakotas in the Badlands, derailing the negotiations, and set out to intercept them.

On December 28, on the southern side of the state, two members of the Lakota band overtook two Army scouts watering their horses and told the scouts they were on their way to Pine Ridge. The scouts informed their commander, who intercepted the Lakotas with guns and demanded an unconditional surrender. After the Lakotas agreed, the troops and the tired and hungry Lakotas set off for Pine Ridge. That night, they camped inside the reservation at Wounded Knee Creek.

During the night, a new commander, James Forsyth, took over. Dead set on a show of force, he insisted on disarming the Lakotas before they set off for the agency. Many of the young men refused to give up their guns, which were the only way they could feed their families through the winter. As soldiers tried to wrench a gun from a man's hands, it went off into the sky. "Fire! Fire on them!" Forsyth screamed.

The soldiers did. The first volley brought down the men who were being disarmed, as well as about twenty-five of the soldiers themselves, who had moved into a circle around the Lakota men and boys during the course of the morning. In the haze from the gun smoke, Lakota men grabbed weapons from nearby soldiers and dove for the dry creek bed that ran behind the camp, hoping to hike along it and

escape. The women and children had been separated from the Indian men during the morning. When the firing began, women ran for the wagons and horses.

But they could not escape. Over the next two hours, frenzied soldiers hunted down and killed every Lakota they could find. Soldiers trained artillery on the fleeing wagons as troops on horseback combed the hills for fugitives. Some of the escaping women were ridden down three miles from the encampment. When the wagons stopped moving, the soldiers moved the guns to the creek bed and shot everyone who moved. Within a few hours, at least 230 Lakotas, mostly women and children, were dead.

The outcry against this butchery started in the Army itself. Miles was incensed that the simple surrender of a peaceful band of Lakotas had become what he called a “criminal military blunder and a horrible massacre of women and children.” He demanded an inquiry into Forsyth’s actions. Miles’s report was so damning his own secretary asked him to soften it.

But President Harrison’s administration was in terrible electoral trouble, and his men wanted no part of an attack on soldiers that would imply that Harrison’s agents had first created a war and then mismanaged it. They dismissed Miles’s report with their own, which blamed the Lakotas for the massacre and concluded that the soldiers had acted the part of heroes. In spring 1891, President Harrison awarded the first of twenty Medals of Honor that would go to soldiers for their actions at Wounded Knee.

In the end, though, all of the political maneuvering by Harrison’s men came to naught. After weeks of squabbling, the South Dakota legislature rejected the Republican candidate and named an Independent senator who caucused with the Democrats. And in 1892, Harrison lost the presidency to Grover Cleveland, who promised lower tariffs and a return to civil service reform.

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Notes:

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/sep/26/pete-hegseth-wounded-knee-massacre-medals-of-honor>



Trump moves toward deal to give US an equity stake in company developing Nevada lithium mine



Ho‘okahi nō lā‘au lapa‘au, ‘o ka mihi

Museum After Hours Friday, October 10, 2025

5 pm – 9 pm

Location:

Hawaiian Hall Complex | Gallery Lawns

\$10 pre-sale, \$15 at the door for General Admission. Free for Bishop Museum Members.

In partnership with the Mary Kawena Pukui Cultural Preservation Society, **Bishop Museum invites you to celebrate the life, work and legacy of our hero of cultural preservation, Mary Kawena Pukui.** Join us as we delve into a deeper understanding of ho‘oponopono, a traditional Hawaiian practice of conflict resolution and restoring balance, as taught and lived by our kūpuna. Our honored guests, Loea Ho‘oponopono Lynette Kahekili Kaopuiki Paglinawan, PhD and Manulani Aluli Meyer, PhD will guide this exploration of reflections and meditations on ho‘oponopono.

Mrs. Paglinawan, a respected social worker who worked closely with Mary Kawena Pukui, will share her personal experiences learning directly from Mrs. Pukui. **She will reflect on how Pukui’s teachings shaped her approach to social work, community well-being and her continued transmission of ‘ike ho‘oponopono, grounding her practice in the cultural values of aloha, pono, and lōkahi.** Dr. Aluli Meyer, a leading scholar and practitioner of Indigenous leadership and education, will join Paglinawan in conversation to explore how ho‘oponopono continues to serve as a vital framework for healing in contemporary times. Together, they will weave stories, scholarship, and practice, inviting participants to consider how this tradition might be carried forward to meet today’s challenges.

This program is part of the 2025 Nānā I Ke Kumu Series | Honoring the Legacy of Mary Kawena Pukui, a collaborative effort between the Mary Kawena Pukui Cultural Preservation Society and Bishop Museum, celebrating the ways Pukui’s scholarship, mentorship, and cultural wisdom continue to nourish and guide the lāhui.

‘Ōlelo No‘eau 1077

Ho‘okahi no lā‘au lapa‘au, ‘o ka mihi.

There is one remedy — repentance.

For information on the full series of events dedicated to Mrs. Pukui, please click this link: [2025 Nānā i ke Kumu Series | Honoring and Perpetuating the Legacy of Mary Kawena Pukui](#)

The [Mary Kawena Pukui Cultural Preservation Society’s](#) purpose is to be a unique and invaluable educational resource based on the life’s work of Mary Kawena Pukui, who dedicated her life to the preservation of the Hawaiian culture and language, authoring over 50 scholarly publications, composing over 150 songs and chants. Pukui was widely recognized as a historian, translator, author, teacher, lecturer, composer, researcher, genealogist, hula expert, lexicographer and more.

Header photo courtesy of Loea Ho‘oponopono Lynette Kahekili Kaopuiki Paglinawan; Mrs. Pukui with Lynette and Līkeke Paglinawan.

American Library Association

We're proud to announce that legendary actor, author, and activist George Takei will serve as the 2025 Honorary Chair of Banned Books Week, taking place October 5–11. He'll be joined by youth advocate Iris Mogul, who founded a banned books club in Florida to fight censorship in schools.

This year's theme — Censorship is so 1984. Read for Your Rights. — reminds us that the right to read belongs to all of us, and that censorship has no place in our society.

<https://www.ala.org/.../legendary-actorauthoractivist...>



The top 8 technological trends set to shape water management in 2025

<https://escorewater.org/blogs/news/the-top-eight-technological-trends-set-to-shape-water-management-in-2025>

What would an Indigenous Law of the Sea look like?

From deep-sea mining to climate change, this Indigenous woman sees a better future for the world's oceans.



Grist /Sealaska

‘Wáahlaal Gíidaak, who is Indigenous Haida, Tlingit, and Ahtna Athabascan, grew up on Prince of Wales Island in Alaska that was home to about 6,000 people.

She spent her career working in government and public policy advocating for Indigenous peoples and when she was first approached to work for the Ocean Conservancy, a nonprofit dedicated to protecting oceans, she initially hesitated.

“A lot of our conservation organizations in the U.S. and Alaska have not always had a great history of working with Indigenous peoples in a healthy way,” she said.

She eventually took the job and is now the vice president of the Ocean Conservancy’s Arctic and Northern Waters program where she’s helping to convene conversations about what it would mean to create an Indigenous Law of the Sea.

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The Law of the Sea typically refers to international law described in a 1982 United Nations Convention that governs what states can and can’t do in the ocean, and it serves as the basis for modern-day international law governing the ocean. The [newly ratified “high seas treaty”](#) creating a framework for ocean conservation builds upon the foundation set by the Law of the Sea. But like other U.N. treaties, only recognized states were able to sign onto that law, and not Indigenous peoples like Gíidaak’s. The U.N. system prioritizes the perspectives and voices of governments that are internationally recognized, which makes it difficult for Indigenous peoples who have lost their lands and political independence to ensure their concerns are considered.

Gíidaak thinks that vacuum leaves opportunity for Indigenous peoples to organize and create their own version of international law that governs the oceans. Inspired by the Māori law of the sea in Aotearoa New Zealand, Gíidaak envisions a more expansive document that spans geographies and nationalities that could help Indigenous peoples more effectively organize and advocate around critical ocean issues like [climate change and deep-sea mining](#).

Grist spoke with ‘Wáahlaal Gíidaak about what an Indigenous Law of the Sea might entail, why it’s important, and what is being done to create it. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q. How would you describe your own personal connection to the sea?

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A. In our historical retelling of our islands, it is where ravens found a clam shell and pulled humans out of the clam shell. This is our story from time immemorial that tells of when humans first came to these islands. This imperative and this connection to these islands has been one that’s existed for a very long time, and our connections to the nonhuman beings that exist in the ocean are part of our DNA and part of the thing that keeps us going.

About 20 or so years ago they found one of our ancestors in a cave in Prince of Wales island, and that ancestor was about 10,000 years old. They tested the DNA for our ancestor against the population of today and sure enough it matched. But the thing I found interesting was the DNA they found in the stomach of that ancestor was salmon. So for over 10,000 years we have had a

connection with salmon that preexisted any laws that dictated how we harvested our salmon today. The salmon that existed back then were [saber-toothed salmon](#).

We are starting to see the salmon disappear from our homelands and it is the last, largest wild salmon stock on the planet. Many of our communities have gone without being able to harvest salmon for at least five years now because the salmon populations have been so mistreated that our people cannot sustain our way of life and our relationship with salmon like we have always done.

Q. How is climate change affecting that relationship that you and your people have with the ocean?

A. The Arctic is warming at four times the rate that it should be. As our ice sheets melt in the Arctic and in the central Arctic Ocean, it's creating a rise in the ocean that's impacting the rest of the world.

We're seeing our glaciers really receding at an exacerbated rate and we need those glaciers to continue to provide for everything in our ecosystem. The glacier melts every year are what provides for our rivers. We need them to be at a steady pace and not one that's exacerbated as it is today.

Folks have been talking about [turtles coming into our waters](#), which is crazy to think about these species that are typically subtropically making their way to Alaska, which is the last place you'd assume a subtropical species would be. We're also seeing the changes in our ocean and our seaweed, which is a main part of our diet.

Q. Why are you interested in compiling an Indigenous Law of the Sea?

A. My sisters in this work realized there is a space for Indigenous people at these big convenings where they're making decisions about our homelands, and usually the space for Indigenous people is an afterthought. We get a seat at the table sometimes. It's not a voting seat. It's not a space where Indigenous voices are front and center. And so thinking through and realizing that our laws still carry through to today in how we operate on the ocean, how we operate in our waters — not only state and federal laws but an ancestral way of caring for the ocean that goes beyond those spaces. We were realizing that if the world uplifted those same principles and protocols for how they operate on our waters, we could get a little further down the road of caring for our ocean and our waters and caring for beyond-human beings in those spaces, if we were to uplift the truths and protocols of our people in all spaces.

Q. How would the creation of an Indigenous Law of the Sea interact with existing international law?

A. As we set out to create an Indigenous Law of the Sea, it's not to say that we're just going to replicate the U.N. Law of the Sea and then just put Indigenous names and faces and words in there, but to create our own Indigenous law. We're not saying that this should replace the U.N.'s Law of the Sea. What we're saying is that this can be an additive: to share with the world the protocols by which Indigenous peoples have always held a relationship with waters, what the protocols have taught us for thousands of years on how to treat these oceans and our relatives that exist in these oceans, how do we live in a balance and how have our ancestors taught us how to have this relationship with the ocean? What is our taboo that still exists today for how we go

out on the water, and how our children and our children's children will be taught to respect and have that care for the place that has always sustained our way of life?

Just writing those down, getting those stories out to the world so that the world can have a better understanding of what that protocol would look like.

We're just having that conversation in Alaska right now, but we're also in conversation with our relatives in Aotearoa New Zealand, in Hawai'i, with our brothers and sisters in Canada. What does it look like if we were to collectively pull into one document some of our similar stories and protocols for how we treat the ocean, and then just shared that with the world? This is a better way of being than what has currently existed, a way and a relationship that predates any government coming into these spaces that is not our own. And what would the world look like if everybody started to operate the way that Indigenous people have, and the way Indigenous people have cared for these places?

Q. Why is this important?

A. There is an opportunity for Indigenous people to say, "These are our laws," and putting those front and center because we've never done that before.

We see so many different countries, so many different leaders trying their best to push things forward. And the laws that they're creating are important, and the laws they're taking a stand on are important. But we've never flexed our sovereignty as Indigenous people and said, "These are our waters." They were our waters long before a lot of these government folks decided to step into these places, and our laws have had a reciprocal relationship in this space for a long time.

[Anita Hofschneider](#)

The sovereignty we carry is inherent. We have an inherent sovereignty. We had a sophisticated form of governing for our people, taking care of our communities long before any of these other governments decided that they wanted to be here. And so thinking through what it looks like for us to continue to uphold those sovereignty as nations of people across the country, across the globe, what does it look like for us to start flexing that sovereignty and saying, "Whatever's happening over there is fine, but these are our laws, and this is our negotiated table. You can come and you can be an observer at our table. This is our table to finally have a conversation with just Indigenous people collectively standing on our own ancestral DNA and imperative for what the future protection and caring of these places should look like."

Q. Where are these conversations happening?

A. We've held one gathering so far in Alaska. We invited all of our tribes and all of our native entities and leadership throughout Alaska to come sit down with us for three days. We invited our family from Aotearoa, our Māori brothers and sisters, to help us be catalyzers. The Māori are way ahead of us, like they always are. And they've already developed [their own Indigenous Law of the Sea](#). And some Hawaiian folks and then some folks from Greenland and other places came to help us be catalyzers in this space. As it grows beyond Alaska, I would love to see something a little more formalized. We sat down at the [U.N. Ocean Conference](#) in France as an impromptu, informal gathering of what we ended up calling the Indigenous Peoples Ocean Alliance. I'm not sure where it's going to take us, but I want to see us continue to grow in creating our own table.

Q. What should Indigenous peoples know about who can participate in this process?

A. A lot of our people think that they don't carry the knowledge that can go into something like an Indigenous Law of the Sea, because so much has been lost as a result of colonization. And what we've shared with them is that you're upholding those practices, and you know whether you have been told these are our traditional stories or not. The way that our people go out on the ocean, the way that people go in our waters, and the way they're operating and treating these waters is part of that Indigenous Law of the Sea. I think that a lot of our people think that they have to be an expert in our traditional languages, or an expert in our traditional oratory or our traditional stories in order to come to these spaces and to speak the truth that we've always known of how we care for these places. And that's absolutely not the case. I just want our people to feel that this is an opportunity for so many to share, especially those who are out on our waters day in and day out, what their relationship is with the water, what they've always been taught, how the world should be treating our oceans as a result of the lessons that they have learned over time.

Our DNA tells us it's our responsibility to care for these places, with or without funding, with or without support. We are going to fight for the future of these places. This imperative will last for the next 15,000 years in our responsibility to care for these places. We're always going to be here. We're always going to be in our homelands and in our home waters. We're not going anywhere.

This story has been updated to clarify a point 'Wáahlaal Gíidaak made about Arctic melting.



A group of Indigenous teenagers became the first people in 100 years to paddle all 310 miles of the newly undammed Klamath River.

The story continues to show up in a variety of media around the world.